

Up, up and awaaaaaaay

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Balloons + Ballooning

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This is a story about hot air, and how, in one application, it can cure the mid-winter blahs.

February? Hibernating 'animals sleep away the frozen hours, while we humans try desperately to preserve body heat and sanity.

Hardly the time of year for a hot air balloon festival, I thought, when planners announced Madison's first Spirit of Ballooning Fiesta late last year.

But a one-hour ride in one of the two dozen hot air balloons launched

Saturday in Madison, left little doubt that February may well be the best time of year for an event so spirited, colorful and enchanting.

As an observer for pilot Steve Meister, I was responsible for recording data used in awarding points in Saturday's pilot-designated goal (PDG) competition. In a PDG competition, each pilot selects a landing site on a map before launching, then tries to land his craft as close as possible to the designated goal.

When Meister, a 27-year-old court reporter from Phillips, suggested I pick a point on a county highway map, I looked at him dumbfoundedly,

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remembering how I routinely lose myself on Madison streets.

Conceding my meteorological acumen left something to be desired, Meister somewhat haphazardly pointed his finger to the intersection of Highway PB and Grandview Road, east of Verona. From our launch site on the north shore of Lake Wingra, the dominant southwesterly winds would — "I hope" — carry our balloon directly over the crossroad, he predicted.

Meister and crew were unloading his 77,000-cubic-foot balloon from its canvas carrying bag when a fiesta organizer, hoping the balloons would launch before wind speeds picked up, scrambled past yelling: "Inflate your balloons! Five minutes to launch!" (High winds forced the cancellation of balloon launchings on Thursday and Friday.)

Mumbling "that guy doesn't know what he's talking about," Meister, continued unpacking the balloon, ignoring photographers anxious to frame his Red Baron-like costume: a red stocking hat pulled snugly over his ears, World War II-style aviator glass-

ses, a long yellow scarf wrapped around his neck and a tattered black leather jacket.

When cleared for launch, the jovial, bearded Meister turned serious, barking orders to his ground crew: "Keep that line tight! Step on that rope! Get out of the way!"

In minutes, a portable airplane propeller had filled the lifeless, eight-color nylon sack with cold air. Meister quickly ignited two propane gas burners and shot a four-foot stream of orange fire into the balloon.

Six pairs of mitten hands grabbed the bamboo gondola as the inflated balloon rose from the lake surface into an upright position. Meister bellowed "We're ready!" and Dan Chase, his co-pilot, and I leaped into the basket as the ground crew released its grip.

Meister's 65-foot tall "Black Rainbow" eased gently off the lake, whistling past two other balloons being launched nearby. The smooth, gradual and noiseless lift-off went unnoticed by me — until I looked down and saw the earth dropping away.

We climbed to about 1,500 feet and drifted westward, watching as the bevy of bright-colored balloons brought Madison's cement-gray skyline to life.

Like a fire-breathing dragon, the propane burners roared and hissed as they heated the air inside the balloon to 90 degrees F. At an altitude of 1,800 feet, we caught a breeze that sent us heading for the three needle-shaped television towers on Madison's West Side.

Not one for battling windmills or television towers, Meister let the balloon cool, and in minutes it dropped to